

“Groundhog Day”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
February 2nd, 2014
4th Sun. after Epiphany

1st Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

‘... God chose the foolish things of this world to put the wise to shame.

He chose the weak things of this world to put the powerful to shame.’

1 Cor. 1:27

Let us pray... O God,

Teach us how practicing humility, patience, and loving-kindness can be heroic.

Amen

Today happens to be Groundhog Day and

Groundhog Day is associated with a folk tradition such that

if a groundhog sees its shadow and is scared back underground,
then we are in for 6 more weeks of winter weather!

This is celebrated in various communities of Pennsylvania –

with the largest and most famous being the festival in Punxsutawney, P.A.
where thousands of people gather to witness the outcome
of what the groundhog will do when it comes out of its burrow.

For the sake of everyone north of the Florida panhandle

who have already been suffering from an unusually harsh winter so far,
let’s hope for them that there is an end to any more storms.

“Groundhog Day” also refers to a 1993 movie comedy about a very arrogant man
who gets caught in a time warp in which he re-experiences the same day,
day after day.

The question is:

Will he ever break the cycle of being stuck in a rut, by changing his selfish ways?

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groundhog_Day#cite_note-folklore-1

Because of its theme – how, ultimately, kindness leads to liberation,
the film, “Groundhog Day”, has been embraced by a wide variety
of faith communities, including Hindus, Buddhists, Jews,
Catholic, Evangelical, and Progressive Christians,
Wiccans, Falun Gong Chinese, Existentialists, Humanists,
and those who consider themselves to be “SBNR”,
or “Spiritual But Not Religious”.

<http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/228088/movie-all-time/jonah-goldberg>

Willard, p.2

It has been suggested that insanity is the constant repetition of the same action with the expectation that somehow the outcome will be different.

In popular culture, “Groundhog Day” has also come to signify being caught in a bad situation, facing the same thing over and over again –

With each new report of some senseless act of violence like the one most recently at a mall store in Columbia, MD, how is it that we cannot agree to have a shared commitment to change our culture of violence?

Like the lyric from Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ In The Wind”, we all must ask,
How many deaths will it take till we know that too many people have died?

I have spoken before of Rene Girard’s theory about the cycle of redemptive – or sanctified violence, which is based on the premise that the competition of “all against all” leads to escalating violence until someone is targeted as a scapegoat.

Girard says that this is how civilizations are created and how a false sense of security is restored.

It is a vicious cycle that is – to some extent, something we are all familiar with; Take for example, this classic description of *‘the six phases of a big project’*...

A Big Project starts with *enthusiasm*, but soon encounters *disillusionment*, and disintegrates into *panic and hysteria*, followed by
a search for the guilty, punishment of the innocent, and praise for the non-participants.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six_phases_of_a_big_project

Haven’t we all been there, or even done that – caught up in that vicious cycle?

Girard even goes so far as to say that all the world’s cultural myths follow a similar plot-line that supports this cycle of sanctified violence.

Joseph Campbell, who taught comparative mythology, called this plot formula, “The Hero’s Journey” – or “The Monomyth”, because of its universality.

Basically, the storyline goes like this:

A hero is called to go forth on a quest,
crosses a threshold into a supernatural realm,
faces great temptations and trials, gets help from higher powers,
achieves the quest, has a miraculous escape,
returns across the threshold, to have mastery
in both the natural world and the supernatural realm.

In another version of this formula, the story of Christ can be seen as a ‘hero’s journey’, similar to sacred stories of other cultures.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monomyth>

Willard, p.3

Rene Girard, however, challenges the “hero” myth by offering an alternative:
that Jesus’ story – and all the Biblical narratives, serve as a counter-myth.
Girard says that Jesus’ story is not about the ‘hero’, but about the ‘victim’...

Our Gospel lesson today includes a familiar set of Jesus’ teachings called
“The Beatitudes” – which has been characterized as the ‘Be’ attitudes for
how we should “be”-have especially despite victimizing circumstances.
But when we look at the sequence of these ‘Be’ attitudes, it’s not static but cyclical,
and meant as encouragement for those people pushed to society’s margins.
This is not about a quest for a specific thing,
but rather about opening oneself up into relationship with others.

The Beatitudes begin – and end, with the Kingdom of Heaven,
the Beloved Community, as the reward for the poor in spirit,
who could also be people challenged by poverty and disability.

The word ‘beatitude’ means ‘blessing’ – and I have been told that to be blessed
is not always to be happy, so perhaps a better interpretation is that
the poor ought to be honored in their struggle to survive.

Those who mourn are worthy of honor in the midst of their suffering,
and their reward will be consolation and comfort.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Earth’ –

these are people who are humbled and humiliated by the powers that be .

Yet Jesus’ promised that – with patience, they will win it all in the end.

Those who hunger and thirst will be satisfied, but this can also be taken to mean
that those who seek justice – and won’t rest until they do,
will achieve their goal and be honored.

The merciful are to be honored as people strong enough to give of themselves –
to risk mercy, and in turn be blessed with mercy themselves.

Those who are pure in heart – or pure in their intention,
are blessed because they get it, they understand what God is all about,
and so they shall see God’s love in action.

Blessed are those who work for peace – again, these are people
who are working from a position of power to do good.

Their reward is to be recognized as true offspring of God.

And the cycle closes as it began – just like the poor in spirit,
those who are persecuted unjustly will be honored with Beloved Community,
the Kingdom of God, ‘on Earth as it is in Heaven’.

Conventional wisdom suggests we should seek to become clever and strong
like the heroes of the great myths, but more likely we are
at the mercy of forces and powers greater than our own.

Willard, p.4

But we can take comfort and encouragement that Jesus has shown us
a way to heroically maintain dignity, even in the midst of oppression.
'Blessed are you when others revile you' and treat you with contempt, unjustly –
for you are in good company with the people of God who came before.

We have examples in history of ordinary people who did extraordinary things –
like Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, Abraham Lincoln,
Malala Yousafzai.

There are such people who work in the Food Pantry and Soup Kitchen,
help the Sozo kids in the Ocala Forest,
serve as tutors for children in Wildwood schools,
and volunteers for Hospice, Habitat for Humanity, and Back Bay Mission.

It doesn't have to be big things – simple kindnesses, the Golden Rule,
loving God, loving others as you love yourself, is enough.

Any time we put ourselves out there for something bigger than ourselves, f
or the common good, it counts – and we always get more than we give,
and this gets us out of the rut and onto a life path of purpose.

One of the leaders of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s
said that if young people today knew how that movement got started,
they wouldn't complain that there is no Martin Luther King
to lead them these days, but instead they'd ask, "What can I do to help?"

There are many impoverished young people, these days,
who do not have the opportunities taken for granted by previous generations
for careers, job advancement, or life experience.

Instead, many of them are lured by the false promise of easy money through drugs
or persuaded that violence can achieve the goal of justice.

But Christianity had its beginnings in a time of oppression,
and it was in the midst of weakness that God's greatness was demonstrated,
lifting people out of the tombs and into the sunlight.

Each of us has a calling to the adventure of the journey of faith,
not like the violent myths of old, but the recurring adventure
of patience amidst hardship, while seeking justice
through mercy, integrity, and peace and finding you're already
in Beloved Community as you take your first step on the journey.

We are born, we grow, and we die, but in that cycle of life and death,
we touch other lives while they are on their own journey –
who will touch others in their turn, and others in their turn.

That's the heroic path of Christ's Beatitudes – living with a purpose bigger than
just pleasing yourself – then you find that the path doesn't end,
but unfolds into eternal possibilities.

Willard, p.5

As Pete Seeger sang about the cycles of life,
sing along with me...

*To Everything (Turn, Turn, Turn)
There is a season (Turn, Turn, Turn)
And a time to every purpose, under Heaven*

*A time to be born, a time to die
A time to plant, a time to reap
A time to kill, a time to heal
A time to laugh, a time to weep*

*To Everything (Turn, Turn, Turn)
There is a season (Turn, Turn, Turn)
And a time to every purpose, under Heaven*

*A time to gain, a time to lose
A time to rend, a time to sew
A time for love, a time for hate
A time for peace, I swear it's not too late*

*To Everything (Turn, Turn, Turn)
There is a season (Turn, Turn, Turn)
And a time to every purpose, under Heaven*

http://www.lyricsfreak.com/b/byrds/turn+turn+turn_20026419.html

Amen

1st Corinthians 1:18-31

[18] The message about the cross doesn't make any sense to lost people.

But for those of us who are being saved, it is God's power at work.

[19] As God says in the Scriptures,

"I will destroy the wisdom of all who claim to be wise.

I will confuse those who think they know so much."

[20] What happened to those wise people?

What happened to those experts in the Scriptures?

What happened to the ones who think they have all the answers?

Didn't God show that the wisdom of this world is foolish?

[21] God was wise and decided not to let the people of this world

use their wisdom to learn about him.

Instead, God chose to save only those

who believe the foolish message we preach.

[22] [Judeans] ask for miracles, and Greeks want something

that sounds wise.

[23] But we preach that Christ was nailed to a cross.

Most [Judeans] have problems with this,

and most Gentiles think it is foolish.

[24] Our message is God's power and wisdom

for the [Judeans] and the Greeks that he has chosen.

[25] Even when God is foolish, he is wiser than everyone else,

and even when God is weak, he is stronger than everyone else.

[26] My dear friends, remember what you were when God chose you.

The people of this world didn't think that many of you were wise.

Only a few of you were in places of power,

and not many of you came from important families.

[27] But God chose the foolish things of this world to put the wise to shame.

He chose the weak things of this world to put the powerful to shame.

[28] What the world thinks is worthless, useless,

and nothing at all is what God has used to destroy

what the world considers important.

[29] God did all this to keep anyone from bragging to him.

[30] You are God's children. He sent Christ Jesus to save us and

to make us wise, acceptable, and holy.

[31] So if you want to brag,

do what the Scriptures say and brag about the Lord.

Inspired by Matthew 5:1-12

WHEN JESUS SAW THE CROWDS, HE WENT UP THE MOUNTAIN.
AND HE SAT DOWN WHEN HIS DISCIPLES
HAD CLIMBED UP AND WERE BEFORE HIM.
AND FROM HIS LIPS CAME THIS TEACHING...

“TO BE HONORED ARE THOSE WHO ARE MENTALLY ILL,
FOR THEIRS IS THE BELOVED COMMUNITY OF HEAVEN.
TO BE HONORED ARE THOSE WHO ARE SUFFERING,
FOR THEY SHALL BE COMFORTED.
TO BE HONORED ARE THOSE WHO ARE HUMBLLED,
FOR THEY SHALL WIN IT ALL IN THE END.
TO BE HONORED ARE THOSE WHO
HUNGER AND THIRST FOR JUSTICE,
FOR THEY SHALL BE SATISFIED.
TO BE HONORED ARE THOSE WHO ARE MERCIFUL,
FOR THEY SHALL RECEIVE MERCY.
TO BE HONORED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PURE IN HEART,
FOR THEY SHALL SEE GOD IN ACTION.
TO BE HONORED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PEACE-BUILDERS,
FOR THEY SHALL BE CALLED THE CHILDREN OF GOD.
TO BE HONORED ARE THOSE WHO
ARE PERSECUTED FOR THE SAKE OF JUSTICE,
FOR THEIRS, TOO, IS
THE BELOVED COMMUNITY OF HEAVEN.
“AND TO BE HONORED ARE THOSE OF YOU WHO
ARE CURSED, PERSECUTED, AND ACCUSED
OF ALL KINDS OF TERRIBLE THINGS –
FALSELY, ON MY ACCOUNT,
FOR THE PROPHETS WERE ABUSED IN THE SAME WAY.

Matthew 5:1-12

[1] Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him.

[2] And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

[3] "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[4] "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

[5] "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

[6] "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

[7] "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

[8] "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

[9] "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

[10] "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[11] "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

[12] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.